

Chapter 143 - The Investigation

“My connections inside the council have been quite tight-lipped, so I don't have the full picture of the investigation.” Reishi was uncharacteristically serious, not the hint of a smile on his pale blue features.

“Despite their official response, the Republic isn't going to forget, they won't be satisfied until they find someone to punish. They know someone else was involved in the raid, and they've sent resources and personnel from Higharbor to get to the bottom of it. From what I heard, the orders might come from the governor himself.”

Kai uneasily fiddled with the red fringes of the velvet sofa. "How worried should I be?"

He wasn't sure whether to congratulate himself for being right in his paranoia or slap his face for jinxing it.

The Republic had always been reluctant to spend resources to deal with the rebels. In Greenside, only when the Voice became too annoying did the enforcers respond with a harsh and swift strike.

But this time the mosquitos had stung a sensitive spot. They won't be happy with just swatting it, they want to squash it for good.

If Kai truly saw their inspectors and spies in the streets, he had underestimated the scale of the investigation. This time, the retaliation was going to be different, in both scale and approach.

Goodbye to my sweet and peaceful time. You lasted a whole day and a half.

“I don’t want to scare you,” the merman took a sip of his mint tea, softening his tone. “But when the Republic is looking for people to punish, you need to tread carefully. If you get caught in the middle, I might not be able to pull you out.”

Kai crossed his hands to keep them still. “I already planned to stay as far away from them as possible.”

“Good. I hope you don’t have any *dubious* acquaintances or time spent in shady places.”

“I’m—”

Reishi raised a hand to stop him. “It’s better if you don’t tell me anything in case a skilled *truthteller* questions me. I’m sure you’ve never interacted with suspicious characters and are completely innocent.”

“I am.”

“Of course.” Reishi nodded a bit too emphatically. “That’s a good start, but you need to be more than innocent. You need to be unremarkable and boring. If during their investigation they discover your grade or the specifics of your profession, they won’t turn away because it wasn’t what they were looking for.”

Kai’s hand unconsciously touched the amulet beneath his shirt. The pendant had been enchanted by Virya to show his race as Orange ★. Anyone looking would only see a piece of polished iron. That was unless they took it away from him. Then he would jump to Orange ★★★ and the truth would be obvious.

And if his grade was so high, what about his profession? Or the ring he had on his finger and all it contained. If the first piece fell, they wouldn’t stop shaking him until the whole castle of cards came apart.

“What should I do?” His apparent calm was kept together by thin threads of Improvisation.

Reishi's gaze weighed him. "I assume you have more secrets aside from the ones you've told me. You don't need to tell me that either."

"To not betray me to a *truthteller*?" While Kai had never heard the name before, it was pretty on the nose. He'd bet a silver that was how they called someone with a profession and skills to detect lies. He had always suspected Zerith had a similar skill, though he was never able to confirm.

Obviously, the Republic needed to have an order of creepy inquisitors. They must be rare since I've never heard of one before, otherwise I'm beyond screwed.

"Just common courtesy. And speculating in my head what other ridiculous secrets you're hiding is fun. Maybe one day you can tell me if I guess correctly." Reishi refilled his cup, peering deeply at him. "So, you know, one of my contacts told me a *truthteller* landed in Sylspring this morning, directly from Higharbor."

Great.

Reishi waved his worry away. "Oh, don't worry too much about that, by law you don't need to answer a *truthteller* unless it's relevant to their investigation."

Thank all the spirits!

"That's a surprisingly reasonable and fair law to avoid abuse of their powers," Kai said tentatively. Was there really no catch?

Reishi burst into laughter, almost choking on his tea. The merman coughed into a napkin, never losing the grin on his blue lips. "Sometimes I forget you're still a child."

There was no mocking in his tone, but Kai's confusion immediately turned into visceral irritation. "What's so funny?" There were few things that triggered him more than being called a child.

I'm not a damn child, you dumb fish!

“Your innocence, it’s adorable. Come on, don’t glare at me, we were all there once.” Reishi gave him an annoying pointy smile that showed his ivory teeth.

“Unfortunately, fairness has little to do with it. The higher and richer you are the more you have to hide, and it doesn’t exclude the venerable members of the Azure Council. They’d never allow someone who could end their career with a question to exist. The fear of that ability to be turned against them vastly surpasses any utility.”

Kai crossed his arms with a glower. *Indeed*, assuming the laws were thought to be just even in principle had been naive of him.

There was no need to laugh.

“Sorry I laughed.” Reishi finally wiped that smirk from his face. “More tea?”

“Thank you.” As always, Kai accepted the peace offering with grace.

The merman poured the rest of the teapot. “Even with those laws, you must not lower your guard. Most *truthtellers* love to wring out information from casual remarks or take advantage of people who don’t know the regulations that bind them. They’ll make you think you have to answer every question if you let them.”

Now, I kinda expected that. I’m not that naive.

“I’ve bought a law codex, but I haven’t had time to read it with what happened.”

I'll need to start getting through it, at least the important parts. Another project to add to the pile, yay!

The thick volume still rested in his spatial ring. Originally, Kai wanted to learn the basic laws for his alchemy business, though the first few pages of obtuse jargon had made him procrastinate on the task.

Lawyers must get a perverse joy from making everything unnecessarily cryptic and long-winded so only they know what it means.

Reishi nodded sagely. "That's a good idea, you should always know the laws of every place you visit. Ignorance is the root of every poor bargain, and a sure way to cheat somebody."

"I guess you must be an expert about that." Kai immediately regretted the snarky comment. Merchants did have a certain *reputation*...

Okay, that was an asshole move.

Before Kai could beat down his pride and mutter an apology, the merman spoke again.

"Did I ever try to take advantage of your ignorance to swindle you?" Reishi's face was impassive.

Actually, you tried a couple times, though I think you call that haggling. As people say: the only honest merchant is a broke merchant.

Attacking how the merman did business probably wasn't the best idea. "I didn't mean it like that."

“Oh, you didn’t...” Reishi narrowed his eyes with an amused glint. “Maybe I shouldn’t have gone easy on you in our negotiations.”

He’s lying, that wasn’t easy mode.

“What I meant to say is that you need to know something to defend against it. That’s why you must know it so well.”

“I see,” Reishi’s pointy smile came back. “Do you want me to draw our next deals by myself since you think so *highly* of me?”

“Of course, I know you’re not someone who would *ever* take advantage of a *friend* who trusts you. You’ll only give me the best deals, right?” Kai reciprocated the smile.

Their gazes crossed for several seconds before they both burst out laughing. Spurred by each other’s amusement they took a minute to stop giggling like fools.

“Thank you, Kai. I don’t remember the last time I laughed so hard, I needed that.” Reishi dried the tears from his eyes. “So, you’ll let me draw the next draft of our contract?”

“You’re welcome. And no, I’m not going to give up our *friendly* haggling.”

It better be friendly!

“Was worth a try.” Reishi shrugged. “Anyway, it wouldn’t be bad if you spent the next months brewing in a secluded space, just until things settle down. I could arrange something if you want.”

Why doesn’t that surprise me?

“I appreciate the offer, but I need to level my profession.” While practicing Alchemy would fall into the purview of Mana Child, the XP growth wouldn’t be fast or efficient. Especially if he only brewed potions day and night.

The merman slumped down, disappointed. “I know you must be excited to use your new profession, I couldn’t think of anything else after I got mine but be mindful when you practice it. Rare or unusual skills will attract attention and make people curious. It would be better not to use it at all for the next few months.”

What are the odds Mana Echo falls into the category?

“I’ll be careful,” Kai promised. The timer on Virya’s riddle had less than nine months remaining, waiting wasn’t an option. He needed the extra attributes, the more levels the better.

After making his stance clear, Reishi didn’t insist, and the conversation turned to lighter topics. They set up an appointment with the tailor to get fitted for the enchanted clothes.

Half an hour later, Kai walked out of the mansion in a cheerful mood. “Till next time.” He waved at the old butler.

“The pleasure was mine, Master Kai.” The gate was shut close with more force than necessary.

Alfred, you’re such a jokester.

The talk had settled his mind. It wasn’t all good news—actually very little of it was—but now he knew what to look out for. A known danger was always less scary than the dark.

Just keep your head down, don't attract attention and don't let anyone see your magnificent profession. What could go wrong?

Kai forced himself to ignore the passersby who glanced at him. His house was the safest and most unassuming place and he'd probably be spending most of his days there for the foreseeable future.

Suddenly feeling a bit restless, Kai strolled down the streets, letting his feet take the lead. He could justify a longer walk since he was already out. It was almost noon, but he wasn't hungry yet. He enjoyed the sea breeze, standing in the shade of the buildings to avoid the beaming sun.

I won't get many chances to let loose anytime soon, I better make peace with it.

He should probably avoid training Blessed Swimmer and Empower. Even in the desolate southern beach, far from the town, he couldn't be completely sure that no one was watching. Physical exercises in general might be too eye-catching.

If someone was passing Sylspring through a fine comb for any suspicious sign, they'd likely take an interest in a kid that was stronger and faster than he should be.

Indeed, practicing magic might become a problem too. The shores weren't safe from prying eyes, and the jungle was the worst possible place to be.

A kid who goes into Veeryd to hide? Yeah, that's someone who would attract attention for sure. Maybe I could try practicing casting underwater?

Lost in his thoughts, Kai bumped into a person coming out of an alley. They both dodged in the same direction at the last second, sealing their fate.

With an arm on the ground to regain his balance, Kai narrowly kept on his feet. "I'm sorry, I wasn't looking whe— Flynn?"

Sitting on the paved street of poshtown, scowling, the boy looked up at him. His annoyed frown turned into surprise. "Did you miss me so much that you started stalking me?"

Kai rolled his eyes, but still offered him a hand to stand up. "I could ask you the same. Were *you* following me, why are you here?"

Flynn dusted off his clothes and massaged his backside. "I live here." He pointed to the two-story building in white plaster behind him. The plain color and lack of decorations made it look unassuming in contrast with poshtown colorful and flamboyant architecture.

"So, what's your excuse? Because it looks to me like you're the one doing the stalking."

He could be lying, but what would be the point?

"Do you really live here?"

"Yes, it comes with my job," Flynn avoided his gaze. "I can show you the hole they stash us in if you don't believe me."

"I believe you, still it's a pretty nice area."

"Yeah, it's not too bad..." Flynn tiredly shrugged.

"Anyway, I was just taking a walk. The town isn't that big, and coincidences do happen..." Kai paused.

What are the chances it's just random when I have 34 Favor? Or was it Hallowed Intuition making me wish to stretch my legs?

Reishi had told him to stay away from dubious acquaintances. An ex-spy for the rebels likely fit that category, still he needed to see if fate was truly playing with him.

He might know something I need.

“You know what, Flynn? I think I was looking for you.” Kai put on his brightest smile. “Why don’t we have lunch together?”

His green observant eyes searched for a catch. “Are you paying?”

“Sure.”

“Where are we going?” Flynn threw an arm around his shoulder, leading him down the paved street. “Any place is fine, but I’d rather not go to the *Sage Tree Inn* if possible.”

“Why?”

“I’m no longer friends with the owner.”

I should have guessed she was affiliated with the rebels.

“It’s not a problem, we can go to my house.”

Flynn’s arm stiffened. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I don’t want to bother your family.”

“Don’t worry, it’s only us today. They are all out working, but my mom always insists on preparing for me, so there is enough for three.”

Shit, is family a taboo topic for him? Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned my mother...

Flynn didn't blink, it was hard to say with him. Though it burned to admit, Kai was pretty sure the boy's acting skill was higher than his.

"Okay, but if you didn't want to pay, you could have just said so." Flynn patted him on the back with a knowing look. "I don't judge."

Kai suppressed the impulse to slap his face. "Yeah, you caught me."

We also have walls with excellent soundproofing, the perfect place to quietly strangle someone or share compromising information. Whatever happens first.